

The Six Bardos and Five Elements

According to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

- By Dorje Chang Kalu Rinpoche

The word bardo literally means "an interval between two things." *Bar* means 'interval' and *do* means 'two'. We can think of this interval in a spatial or temporal way. If there are two houses, the space between them is a bardo. The period between sunrise and sunset, the interval of daylight, is a bardo. A bardo can be of long or short duration, of wide or narrow expanse.

To a large extent our experience is made up of intervals between one thing and another. Even in the case of the momentary thoughts that arise in our mind, there is an interval between one thought arising and fading and the next thought appearing. Such a gap, even if infinitesimal, is part of every process. Everything we experience has this quality of intervals between states.

The Six Bardos

Certain aspects of bardo are more important than others. One of the most crucial is our waking existence, from the moment of birth to the time we die. This waking existence is the first great bardo on our experience, the '**Bardo between Birth and Death**' (*'che shi bar do'*).

The bardo of the dream state, which lasts from the moment we go to sleep at night until the moment we wake in the morning is another example. The state of consciousness that obtains during that interval is termed the '**Dream Bardo**' (*'mi lam bar do'*).

For an ordinary person, the trauma of death produces a state of unconsciousness, which lasts for an indefinite time: it may be very brief or quite long. Traditionally, this period of blackout is considered to last three and a half days. Afterwards, the consciousness of the individual begins to awaken again and experience things in a new way. The interval of unconsciousness into which the mind is plunged by the trauma of death, and which lasts till the awakening of consciousness again, is referred to in Tibetan as the '*chö nyi bardo*', the interval of the ultimate nature of phenomena; here the mind is plunged into its own nature, though in a confused or ignorant way.

The next phase of the after-death experience is the reawakening of consciousness, which includes the many days that can be spent experiencing the fantastic projections of mind, the hallucinations produced and experienced by the mind in the after-death state. From the moment of this reawakening of consciousness (the end of '*chö nyi bardo*') to the moment we take actual physical rebirth in one of the six realms of samsara, is known as the '*si pa bardo*', the '**Bardo of**

Becoming' Another way of interpreting the Tibetan is as the bardo of possibility, since at this point we have not taken physical birth and there are numerous possibilities for various kinds of existence.

These are the four major instances of the Bardo principle. Another example is a state of meditation: when someone who practices begins to meditate effectively, there is a certain change in consciousness; when that person rises from the meditation and goes about worldly activities again, there is a cessation of that state of consciousness. The interval of actual formal meditation is called the '**Bardo of Meditative Stability**', '*sam ten bar do*'. The sixth bardo we distinguish is the '**Bardo of Gestation**', '*che nay bar do*'. This interval begins at the end of the 'Bardo of Becoming' when the consciousness of the being unites with the sperm and egg in the womb of the mother and lasts until the time of physical birth, the beginning of the 'Bardo between Birth and Death'.

These six kinds of bardo that we experience as human or sentient beings in samsara can be changed for the better, but the power to do this lies in the waking state. It is in the bardo of our present lives that we can make the most progress in developing the ability to deal effectively with all the others. What we usually mean by the word, bardo, however, is the '**Bardo of Becoming**', the phase of hallucinations before new physical conception.

The Five Elements and the Nature of Mind

Our present unenlightened state is based on a fundamental state of ignorance, a fundamental discursive consciousness, '*kun shi nam she*'. It is the fundamental consciousness which is distorted and confused. There is, however, a possibility of experiencing the true nature of mind, and when that pure awareness is present we no longer have '*kun shi nam she*' but '*kun shi yeshe*' (wisdom consciousness). That change of a single syllable from '*nam*' to '*ye*', makes a tremendous difference, because now we are referring to fundamental **Primordial Awareness** rather than fundamental ignorance.

In both cases we are talking about mind, which essentially embodies what in our physical universe we term the five elements. The potential for these elements exists in the mind and always has - it is not something created at some particular time. In its inherent nature, mind always has the five elemental qualities, and it is from this potential that the experiences of the after-death state arise.

When we speak of mind, we speak of something that is not a thing in itself. In its most fundamental sense, mind is not something we can limit. We cannot say it has a particular shape, size or location, color or form, or any other limiting characteristic. The element we call **space**, which in our perceptual situation also has no limiting characteristics, is this very emptiness of mind; this is the elemental quality of space in the mind.

But mind is not simply empty; it has the illuminating potential to perceive anything whatsoever. This unlimited ability of mind to perceive is its illuminating nature, and corresponds to the element of **fire**.

This mind, essentially empty and illuminating, gives rise to all experiences which, whether samsara or Nirvana, is rooted in mind just as plants are rooted in soil. This function of the mind as the origin of all experience corresponds to the elemental quality of **earth**.

Another aspect of the mind is its dynamic quality. Mind is never still: no single experience in it lasts, but quickly passes to another. Whether one is undergoing an emotional reaction, an experience of pleasure or pain, or a sensory perception such as seeing or hearing, the contents of the mind are always in a state of flux. This continual activity of mind is the elemental quality of **wind (air)**.

Mind with these four elemental qualities has always been so and always will be. This very continuity, and the fact that mind adapts itself to different situations, corresponds to the element of **water***. Just as water sustains its continuity and adapts itself to every contour as it flows, the mind too is fluent, continuous, and adaptable.

The Five Elements and the Physical Body

The origin or basis of all experiences is mind, characterized by the five elemental qualities. Our particular situation at the moment is that of physical waking existence, in which we experience what is termed the body of 'Completely Ripened Karma' (*'nam min ji lü'*). The meaning here is that completely ripened karmic tendencies have given rise to this seemingly solid, concrete projection of mind that is our physical body.

The connection between the body we now experience and the mind which produced it is as follows. The solid elements of our body, such as flesh and bone, represent the element of **earth**, just as the "solidity" of mind - its function as the basis and origin of all experience - reflects the element of earth. Similarly, the bodily fluids such as blood, saliva, urine, lymph and so forth, represent the element of **water**. The biological warmth of the body is the element of **fire**, while the element of **space** is represented by the orifices of the body, and by the spatial separation of the organs, which, instead of forming a homogeneous mass, are distinct and separate from each other. Finally, there is the element of **wind (air)** which is connected with the breath, and maintains the organism by way of the respiratory process.

In short, it is from mind, which embodies the five elemental qualities, that the physical body develops. The physical body itself is imbued with these qualities, and it is because of this mind/body complex that we perceive the outside world - which in turn is composed of the five elemental qualities of earth, water, fire, wind (air), and space.

The Five Elements in the Bardo

Right now we are at a pivotal point between impure, unenlightened states of existence and the possibility of enlightenment. For ordinary beings the '*chö nyi*' bardo is experienced as a period of deep unconsciousness following the moment of death. There is no mental activity or perception, only a blank state of fundamental unconsciousness. This bardo ends with the first glimmer of awareness in the mind. In the interval between the end of the '*chö nyi*' bardo and before the beginning of the '*si pa*' bardo there arises what is called the 'Vision of the Five Lights'. The appearance of these is connected with the five elemental qualities.

The different colors which the mind in the bardo state perceives are the natural expression, the radiance, of the fundamental, intrinsic qualities of mind. The element of water is perceived as **white** light; space as **blue**; earth as **yellow**; fire as **red**; and wind (air) as **green**. These colors are simply the natural expression of the elemental qualities in the mind when the first glimmer of consciousness begins to appear.

As consciousness begins to develop and perceive more, the experience of the elemental qualities also becomes more developed. What was formerly the simple impression of different rays or colors of light now undergoes a change. The light begins to integrate itself and cohere into '*tig le*', points or balls of light in varying sizes. It is within these spheres of concentrated light that we experience the 'Mandalas of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities'.

In this context we speak of the five realms of existence in any one of which we may be reborn, because of the impure level of our experience. The usual description is of the **six** *) realms of existence, the six principal emotions that lead to them, and the six Buddhas who appear in them. In the context of the five-fold mandala pattern, however, desire and avarice are combined, because they share the same basic nature of clinging, and so the realm of the 'Asuras' * is eliminated, the higher Asuras being re-classified with desire gods in the god realm, and the lower Asuras included in the animal realm.

The Mandalas of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities

From an absolute level, the mind that perceives a deity and the deity itself are not two separate things, but are essentially the same. As long as we have no direct realization, however, the mind has the impression of being an "I" which experiences and takes as "other" that which is experienced. During the after-death experience, this split results in a tendency of the mind to feel threatened when the first mandala of the peaceful deities arises: the Mandala of the Five Buddha Families, their consorts and attendant deities, and a sixth family, that of Dorje Sempa, like a canopy over the whole mandala. At this time, we perceive enormous spherical concentrations of light, in which we see the Mandala of the Peaceful Deities emanating a most brilliant radiance. To the confused mind, this radiance is quite overpowering, and to confront the peaceful deities is

rather like trying to stare into the sun. With the peaceful deities, we also simultaneously perceive the six light rays connected with the six realms of samsara. These are far less intensive, so the mind that is repelled by the experience of the pure forms tends to be attracted by the subdued light rays leading to the various states of rebirth in samsara. In this way the confused mind is drawn towards samsaric rebirth.

After the mandala of the peaceful deities comes the 'Mandala of the Wrathful Deities'. Ignorance again causes the brilliance and power of these forms, spontaneous expressions of the mind's own nature, to be perceived as something external and threatening. At this point the after-death experience becomes terrifying and repellent, instead of an experience of the unity of the perceiver and the perceived.

The Possibility of Enlightenment in the Bardo

The cycle of teachings known in Tibetan as the '*Bardo Tödrul*' and the empowerments connected with it are designed to help practitioners receive the blessing and develop the understanding that will benefit them in the after-death experience. With this support, when the pure forms are perceived, they will be seen for what they are - projections of mind essentially identical with it and neither external nor threatening. Liberation arises at that moment in the after-death state when consciousness can realize its experiences to be nothing other than mind itself. The teachings and empowerments connected with the Bardo Tödrül cycle introduce us to the deities and explanatory concepts and so prepare us for what happens after death.

The possibility of enlightenment in the after-death state rests upon three things. The first is the fundamentally enlightened nature of mind, the seed of Buddhahood, without which nothing would be possible. The second is the blessing inherent in the pure forms of the deities. The third is the connection we have established with those deities through empowerment, and the understanding we have, both intellectually and intuitively, of what is actually taking place. When all three elements come together, the possibility exists of achieving liberation during the instant of confronting the mandalas of the deities.

If this liberation does not happen in the interval between the '*chö nyi*' bardo and the 'Bardo of Becoming', the benefits of receiving empowerment and understanding teachings about the nature of the after-death experience, that of the 'Bardo of Becoming'. This means that we can either experience a positive rebirth in the cycle of samsara or, in some cases, achieve existence in what we term the 'Buddha Realms', a great and sure step towards ultimate Enlightenment.

The Bardo of Becoming

The experience of confronting the mandalas of the deities takes place only briefly and if the opportunity is lost, then the mind enters the 'Bardo of Becoming'. Here the situation becomes roughly analogous to what we experience now - many varied impressions continually arise in the

mind and we cling to them, taking them all to be ultimately real. This hallucinatory state is traditionally said to last for a period of forty-nine days before the consciousness takes physical form again as an embryo. At the end of each week there is the trauma of realizing that we are dead and our minds plunge into another state of unconsciousness like the one immediately after death, but not quite as intense. After each of these very short periods of unconsciousness, consciousness returns, and once more the mandalas of the deities present themselves, but now in a fragmentary and fleeting way. The successive opportunities afforded by these appearances are not as great as at the first stage, but the possibility of liberation does recur throughout the after-death experience.

The Symbolism of the Mandala of Deities

The purity of enlightenment is embodied by the mandala of deities. For example, what we normally experience as the five Skandhas (the aggregates of the mind/body complex) we recognize on the pure level as the Buddhas of the Five Families. The mind's elemental qualities, which we experience as the elements in our physical body and the outer universe, on the pure level are the five female consorts of the five Buddhas. On the ordinary level we experience eight types of confused consciousness, while on the pure level these are eight male Bodhisattvas. On the impure level we speak of the eight objects of those different kinds of consciousness, and on the pure level we speak of the eight female Bodhisattvas. Each one of these pure forms expresses an enlightened perspective of a part of our impure experience. It is not only possible to connect the different aspects of our impure consciousness with the pure forms, but also to connect these pure forms with the nature of mind itself.

There has been and could still be much commentary on the relationship between these different levels of expression and our own experience. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to understand that the six bardos we've discussed briefly are the six major phases of experience for any being wandering in the cycle of rebirth. In every one of them the practice of Dharma is of the greatest possible value, for through it we can purify ourselves of confusion, obscurations, and negative emotions, and further develop our awareness and merit.

Questions and Answers

Q: Are the mandalas of the peaceful and wrathful deities related to one particular cultural tradition? How do those schooled in other traditions perceive them?

A: In the tradition of these teachings it doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist or not: you will still have the experience of the wrathful and peaceful deities. The advantage of being a Buddhist or having practiced this particular approach is that you will recognize the experience for what it is. But the experience is fundamentally the same, even for non-humans. Every being that goes through the bardo has some perception of the lights, of the concentrated spheres of light, and the mandalas appearing within them. Usually, however, there is no recognition and no attempt at recognition, just a feeling that the experience is threatening and repellent. The mind is terrified and retreats from the experience.

In the traditional texts it is stated that even the consciousness of an insect in the bardo state has the same experience. Each and every being in the six realms of existence has what is called 'Tathagatagarbha', the 'Seed of Enlightenment', which is fundamental awareness of the ultimate nature of mind. It is from this that bardo experiences arise as natural projections of mind, not as something produced by cultural conditioning.

Q: The mind is traditionally described as having three aspects; are the three elements that correspond to these aspects more important than the remaining two?

A: In the presentation of mind as having three aspects - its essence is empty, its nature is clarity, and its manifestation is unimpeded - we reckon the Emptiness and the Clarity of mind as the elements of space and fire. The element of wind (air), the continual movement of mind, is the third aspect, unimpeded manifestation. Now the element of earth is the function of mind as the origin and basis of all experience, and the element of water is the continuity of mind. These two functions (continuity and basis) apply to all three aspects. Thus, the mind is essentially empty (space), has Clarity (fire) and the ability to manifest unimpeded (wind/air), and throughout all three there is continuity (water) and the ability to provide a basis (earth).

Q: I've heard that the body should not be disturbed for three or four days after death. In the West the custom is to embalm the body very soon after death. How important is it that the body be undisturbed, and for how long?

A: Generally speaking, it's good to leave the corpse undisturbed as long as possible. But in many circumstances this is difficult, because we simply don't have the attitude towards death reflected in the bardo teachings. Once a person has died, we feel that the mind no longer has any need for the corpse. We don't have the same kind of respect for the corpse that Buddhists in Tibet did.

But it's not easy to explain these ideas, and if you simply say, "Don't move or touch the body", without giving any reason, you may only make people angry. On the other hand, perhaps you could explain some of these ideas. People might at least appreciate the importance to you of what you're saying, and since they have some feeling of respect towards the corpse, might do their best not to disturb it. It's hard to tell. The general principle of not disturbing a corpse for a short period after death could be encouraged. It is beneficial.

- A 'Very Short but Excellent Explanation' by Dorje Chang Kalu Rinpoche, given in New York 1982